

1. THE LITURGICAL EDIFICE

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THE THRESHOLD OF THE HOLY SHRINE:

OBSERVATIONS ON FLOOR MOSAICS AT ANTIOCH AND BETHLEHEM

In 1935 excavations at Antioch brought to light a cruciform church which has been identified with a high degree of probability as the Martyrion of St. Babylas¹. Erected shortly before 381 A.D., the building subsequently received in its four naves sumptuous yet sober floor decorations consisting of vast mosaic carpets of purely geometric design, while the central crossing – the focal area containing what was almost certainly the saint's tomb – was paved with *opus sectile*. Inscriptions in the north, west and south arms record the laying of the mosaics in the period of Bishop Flavianus (381–404 A.D.). The inscription in the north arm specifies the year 387 A.D. There is no inscription in the east arm, but its mosaic floor, which is on a slightly lower level, is certainly no later, though possibly a little earlier, than the other three. Here, too, the ornaments are exclusively geometric. The whole decoration is a prime example of a trend characteristic of Christian pavement decoration of the late fourth century in many areas, namely, the banishment from the floor of all representational and symbolic imagery and its replacement by purely abstract designs².

The mosaics of the Antiochene sanctuary do, however, comprise one minor and marginal element which is potentially meaningful. Jean Lassus, in his publication of the building, drew attention to the fact that the plain white border (or »surround«) of the mosaic of the east arm bears on its west side, where it adjoins the central square, a row of simple, equal-armed crosses made of double rows of red tesserae and measuring 18 by 18 centimeters each (fig. 1). Three such crosses, spaced at regular intervals, are preserved in the right (or northern) half of the border. A partially preserved motif which followed after a wider interval, a little to the left of the central axis of this border, may have been another, more elaborate cross. The left half of the border is not preserved³.

Lassus, while not excluding the possibility that these crosses may have symbolic significance, was understandably cautious on this score⁴. Cruciform motifs are among a number of simple designs that tend to be scattered in loose sequences on the »surrounds« of late antique floor mosaics⁵. Certainly in many instances no special meaning attaches to these modest devices. But the present case is, after all, not quite in the same category.

¹ *Antioch-on-the-Orontes*, II: *The Excavations 1933–1936* (Princeton, London and The Hague, 1938), p. 5 ff. (J. Lassus); p. 45 ff. (G. Downey). J. Lassus, *Sanctuaires Chrétiens de Syrie* (Paris, 1947), p. 123 ff. D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Princeton, London and The Hague, 1947), I, p. 283 ff.; II, pl. 113–115, 139.

² See my paper in *La Mosaïque Gréco-Romaine* (Colloques internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, 29 Août–3 Septembre 1963, published 1965), p. 341 ff., esp. p. 343 f.

³ *Antioch-on-the-Orontes*, II, p. 20 f. and fig. 19; p. 218 f., Plan IV.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20. In his subsequent discussion of these crosses in *Sanctuaires Chrétiens de Syrie* (p. 297), Lassus does attribute to them a religious significance.

⁵ M. Avi-Yonah, *Mosaic Pavements in Palestine* (Reprinted from *The Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine* [= *QDAP*], II and III), Oxford, n. d., p. 85. See also below, n. 36.

What we have before us is not merely a cruciform ornament but a row of plain, undisguised crosses. We are in a church, and in the mind of a fourth century worshipper the motif must have evoked specific associations no less than it would today. Furthermore, the crosses seem to be confined to one single place in the church: they marked what appears to have been in the original layout of the building the principal approach to the central square which was the actual shrine of the saint⁶.

This last consideration, in fact, permits us to go beyond a generic *interpretatio Christiana* for these crosses and to assert with some confidence what their purpose was. In Early Christian times crosses placed more or less conspicuously on, or near, entrances served primarily an apotropaic function. They denied access to the powers of evil which were thought to lurk particularly at doorways and other openings⁷. There is ample evidence that by the late fourth century crosses were widely used for this purpose and nowhere more profusely than in Syria. St. John Chrysostom, in a sermon preached at Antioch itself within at most a few years of the laying of the floor in the church of St. Babylas, refers to the inscribing of the cross of Christ on houses, walls, and windows as an established custom⁸. He does not elaborate on the reasons for this custom, but in the light of other contemporary documentation – much of it from the same Syrian milieu – there can be no doubt that it had to do with widely held beliefs in the magic efficacy of the sign. At the outset two kinds of buildings were held to be particularly in need of protection – the house and the tomb⁹. Churches, however, soon followed suit, witness instances of crosses on lintels of church doors of the late fourth and early fifth centuries¹⁰. Since the Martyrion of St. Babylas was both a tomb and a church our mosaic crosses fit into this picture very well.

Their meaning and their purpose, then, are hardly open to dispute. They are unusual only in that they appear here not on a lintel or other upright feature of the architecture but on the threshold underfoot. Thresholds were indeed held to be in special need of apotropaia, and if they did not receive them as frequently as did door frames, walls, and vaults, it was because the desire for protection here came into conflict

⁶ There certainly were no crosses in the corresponding borders of the north and south arms; see *Antioch-on-the-Orontes*, II, pl. 48, no. 66 (»Panel A«); pl. 49, no. 67. In the west arm this border is not preserved. But we can be sure that in the original layout of the church the main approach to the central square was from the east rather than from the west, witness the fact that the inscription of Bishop Flavianus in the west arm is placed so as to be read from the east (*ibid.*, p. 35; Levi, *op. cit.*, pl. 114b). The remains of a portico, which were found in front of the west arm, belong to a later phase of the building when there must have been a principal entrance on that side (*Antioch-on-the-Orontes*, II, pp. 22, 35).

⁷ F. J. Dölger, »Beiträge zur Geschichte des Kreuzzeichens, VII«, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, 7, 1964, p. 5 ff., especially p. 23 ff. Cf. also A. Grabar, *Martyrium* (Paris, 1946), II, p. 277 ff.; P. Nautin, »La conversion du temple de Philae en église chrétienne«, *Cahiers Archéologiques*, 17, 1967, p. 1 ff.

⁸ In Matth. Homil. LIV, 4 (Migne, *PG*, 57, col. 537); for the date – probably after 388 and before November

393 – see H. Lietzmann, in Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie*, IX, 2, col. 1817.

⁹ For »Hausschutz« see Dölger, *op. cit.*; for tombs, Grabar, *op. cit.*, p. 279 ff.

¹⁰ I quote the following dated examples of the fourth and early fifth century from churches: Fāfirtin, 372 A. D.: *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904–1905 and 1909*, Div. III, Section B, Part 6 (Leyden, 1922), no. 1199, p. 202; Bābiskā, 390 A. D.: *ibid.*, Div. II, Sect. B, Part 4 (Leyden, 1909), p. 167 and p. 166, fig. 177; Kasr Iblisu, West Church, Baptistery, 431 A. D.: *ibid.*, p. 206 f. and fig. 212; El-Hazimé, 390–391 A. D.: J. Lassus, *Inventaire archéologique de la région au nord-est de Hama* (Institut français de Damas, Documents d'études orientales, IV, 1935–1936), no 93, p. 163. There are many additional examples of later or uncertain date in Syrian churches. A. Grabar has connected this type of lintel decoration with Jewish antecedents (»Recherches sur les sources juives de l'art paléochrétien«, *Cahiers archéologiques*, 11, 1960, p. 41 ff., especially p. 45 ff.).

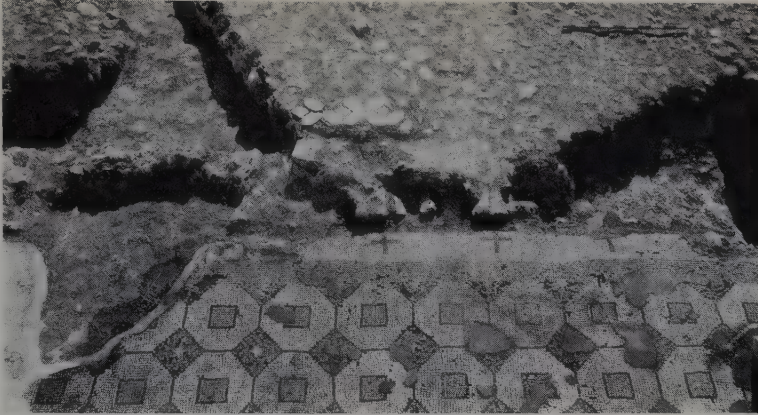


Fig. 1. Antioch, Cruciform Church. Border of Mosaic in East Arm, adjoining Central Square.



Fig. 2. Bethlehem, Church of the Nativity: View from the North with Steps descending to Grotto



Fig. 3. Bethlehem, Church of the Nativity. Mosaic Panel to the South of Steps shown in Fig. 2 (after Harvey).

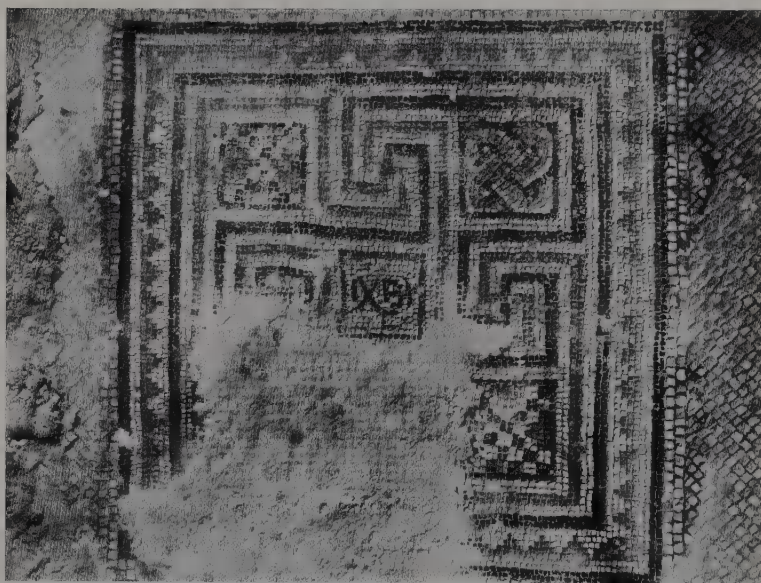


Fig. 4. Bethlehem, Church of the Nativity. Mosaic Panel to the North of Steps shown in Fig. 2 (after Harvey).

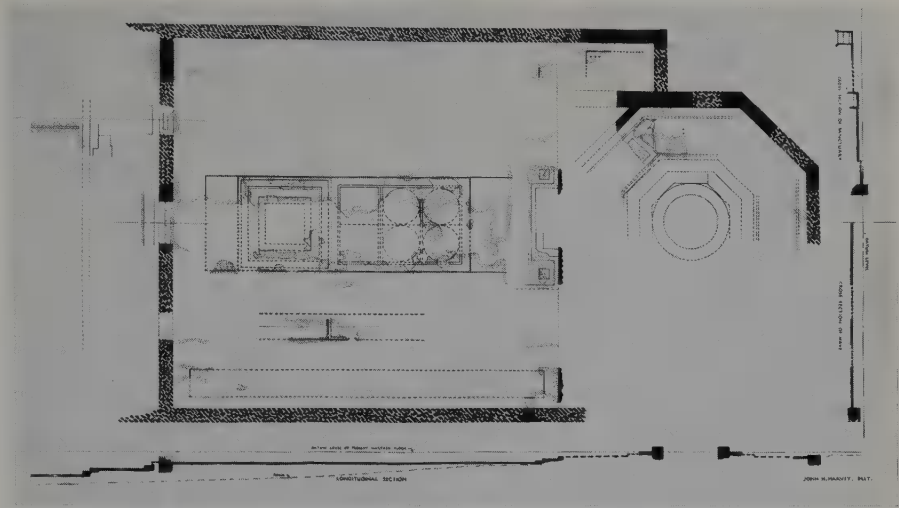


Fig. 5. Bethlehem, Church of the Nativity. Ground Plan of Constantinian Church, showing Position of Floor Mosaics (after Harvey).

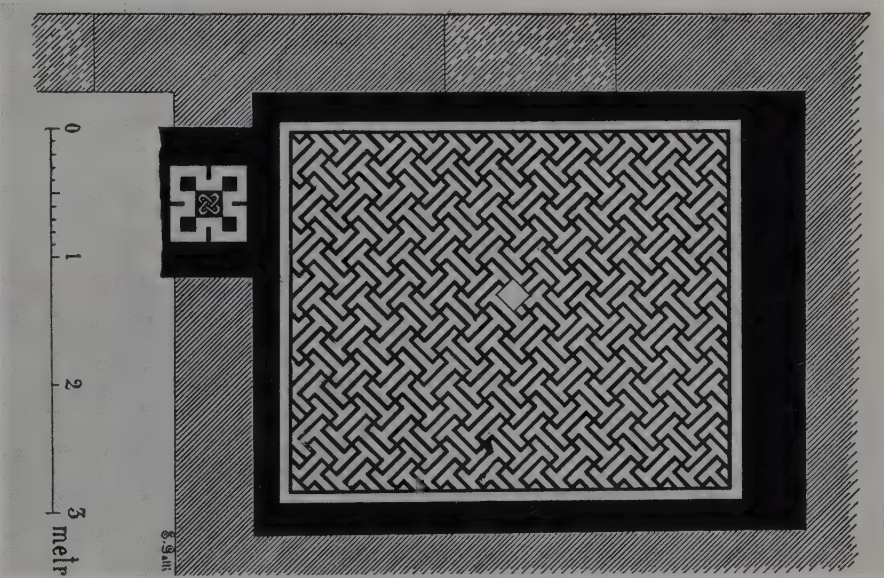


Fig. 6. Ostia. Ground Plan of Room in House, Reg. II, Ins. 6, showing Design of Floor Mosaics (after *Notizie degli Scavi*, 1908).

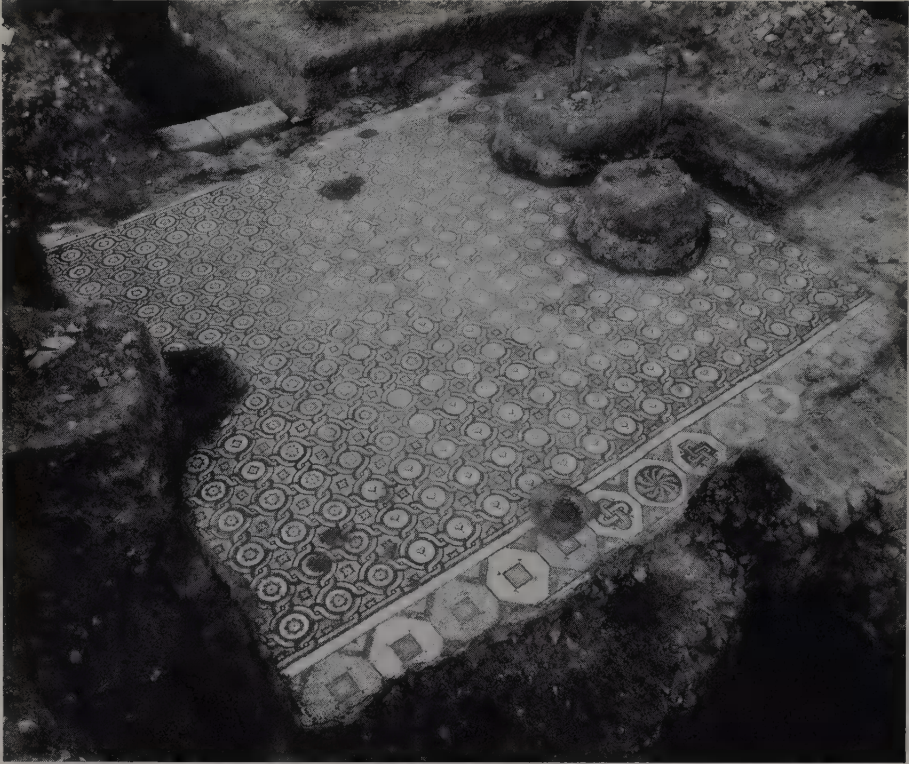


Fig. 7. Antioch, House of Phoenix, Upper Level. Room adjacent to Phoenix Floor.



Fig. 8. Bethlehem, Church of the Nativity. Detail of Mosaic Floor to the North of Constantinian Octagon (after Harvey).

with the fear of desecration¹¹. Placed in this position the sacred sign was liable to be trodden on. Undoubtedly this accounts for the fact that clearly meaningful and undisguised crosses are altogether not very frequent on mosaic pavements and that when they do occur they are usually in places not open to general traffic¹². It is difficult to find another case where they are placed so squarely in the path of a person entering a building or precinct¹³. Yet the form of protection thus provided for the central area of the Antioch church does have a parallel elsewhere. Turning to another martyrion – a *locus sanctus* of far greater importance and renown than the shrine of St. Babylas – we find similar devices similarly incorporated in its floor decoration.

It was presumably during the first half of the fifth century – a few decades after the period of the St. Babylas floors – that the church which the Emperor Constantine had built over the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem received its magnificent mosaic pavements¹⁴. A general compositional relationship of the great carpet in the nave of Constantine's basilica to that in the east arm of the Martyrion in Antioch has long been noted¹⁵. In my opinion the mosaics at Bethlehem represent a somewhat more advanced stage in the development of these carpets. Foliate motifs here begin to be used to break up and enrich the even flow of abstract motifs. The mosaics of the octagonal sanctuary which enshrines the Grotto itself include, in addition to a wedge-shaped unit with a vine rinceau, some panels with birds which intrude into the compact design of an otherwise geometric field. This is the beginning of an evolution which will eventually result in the appearance – or reappearance – of a much more lively and emphatic pictorial repertory on church floors. But it is only a beginning. Essentially the Bethlehem mosaics are still rooted in the tradition of those mute geometric floors which had been characteristic of the late fourth century¹⁶.

¹¹ Dölger, *op. cit.*, p. 32 ff. See also below, p. 00.

¹² P. Gauckler, in: Ch. Daremberg and E. Saglio, *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines*, III, 2 (Paris, 1904), p. 2124; Avi-Yonah, *op. cit.*, p. 81. Finds of recent decades have added a number of examples. See, e. g., Salona-Marusinac, *Basilica: Forschungen in Salona*, III (Vienna, 1939), p. 76, n. 43 and fig. 94; Butrinto, Baptistery: L. M. Ugolini, in: *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, 11, 1934, p. 265 ff., esp. p. 267, fig. 2, and p. 270 f.; Zaharani, *Basilica: M. H. Chehab, Mosaïques du Liban (= Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth*, 14 and 15, Paris, 1958–59), p. 93 with fig. 6, pl. 47, and Plan 7 (cf. also the Chi-Rho monograms of cruciform design in the same mosaic, as well as in the pavements of the chancel: *ibid.*, pls. 45 f.); Damascus, Museum (from the region of Hama): S. Abdul-Hak and A. Abdul-Hak, *Catalogue Illustré du Département des Antiquités Greco-Romaines au Musée de Damas* (Damascus, 1951), p. 69, no. 12, and pl. 33, 2 (I owe this reference to Prof. G. M. A. Hanfmann); Shavei Zion, *Basilica: Revue Biblique*, 65, 1958, p. 420 f. and pl. 13 b (cf. the Unesco publication *Israel-Ancient Mosaics* [1960], pl. 4 and *Israeli Mosaics of the Byzantine Period* [1965], pl. 6; the full report on this site, published in 1967, was not accessible to me); Gerasa, »Glass Court« (see next footnote).

¹³ A single cross is used in a somewhat comparable

manner in the mosaics of the lower level of the so-called »Glass Court« at Gerasa. These mosaics, which also were laid in the second half of the fourth century when the court was remodelled to become an entrance to the Cathedral precinct, consist of a variety of geometric ornaments and are stylistically similar to those of the cruciform martyrion at Antioch. The motif which is of interest to us is directly in front of the steps giving access to the portico of the Cathedral. It is a large disk or whirl with an equal-armed cross in the center. See *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis* (C. H. Kraeling, ed., New Haven, 1938), pp. 217, 309 f., pl. 58 a, b, and Plans 31, 32; cf. J. W. Crowfoot, in: *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement*, 1931, p. 143 ff., especially p. 147 f.

¹⁴ W. Harvey, *Structural Survey of the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem* (London, 1935), p. 21 f.; E. T. Richmond, in: *QDAP*, 5, 1936, p. 75 ff.; 6, 1938, p. 63 ff.; L. H. Vincent, in: *Revue Biblique*, 45, 1936, p. 544 ff.; 46, 1937, p. 93 ff.; W. Harvey and J. H. Harvey, in: *Archaeologia*, 87, 1937, p. 7 ff.; L. H. Vincent, in: *Atti del IV Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana*, II (= *Studi di Antichità Cristiana*, 19, Rome, 1948), p. 65 ff.; B. Bagatti, *Gli antichi edifici sacri di Betlemme* (Jerusalem, 1952), p. 42 ff.

¹⁵ *Antioch-on-the-Orontes*, II, p. 19, n. 15 (Lassus).

¹⁶ For the evolution here sketched, and the place of

Here again, however, there is on the margin of the main composition one clearly meaningful feature. This is the word IXΘYC inscribed in the center of a square panel of meander ornament which is situated in splendid isolation in a large expanse of white mosaic in the eastern »surround« of the nave carpet. Measuring 72.5 x 72.5 cm., the panel containing the famous acrostic is in an oddly eccentric position to the left of a very slightly raised stone platform which is thought to be the lowest of three steps that led from the nave to the sanctuary. The Ichthys panel does have a pendant in a mosaic square of identical size and layout situated in a corresponding position to the right of this platform. But this second panel is made up entirely of conventional motifs. It contains in the center, in lieu of the inscription, a simple rendering of Solomon's knot and thus only adds to the seeming oddity of the arrangement (fig. 2-5).

To my knowledge, the Ichthys panel at Bethlehem has not been adequately explained. The late F. J. Dölger, who devoted to it a brief discussion shortly after it was discovered, cited a number of instances of the acrostic from houses and tombs in Syria and surmised that in churches, too, it must have been more common than the few extant examples would suggest, simply because of the significance attached to it »als der gedrängtesten Kurzform des christlichen Glaubensbekenntnisses«¹⁷. Yet it is to Dölger that we owe the fullest exploration of the protective and apotropaic properties which early Christianity often attributed to the Ichthys formula¹⁸. Primary evidence for this comes precisely from those buildings in Syria which have the word inscribed over their entrances and doors¹⁹. Surely at Bethlehem, too, the word is inscribed at an entrance. It is placed at the approach to the most sacred and most important part of the building, and, like the crosses at Antioch, it guards the threshold which gives access to it²⁰.

The companion panel on the south side (fig. 3) confirms this interpretation. Banal as its ornamentation seemingly is, it gains status and emphasis from the very fact that it is a counterpart to the Ichthys inscription. While the motif of Solomon's knot, which occupies the four corners as well as the center of the square, is among the most common in late antique floor mosaics, in this instance it clearly has a special role to play. What this role was is not hard to determine. The apotropaic use of knots is a recurrent phenomenon in the folklore of many countries and periods²¹. Obviously our inquiry here

the Bethlehem mosaics within this evolution, see my paper cited *supra* in n. 2 (especially p. 347, n. 29). My dating of the Bethlehem mosaics agrees substantially with that proposed by Père Vincent, who saw an additional argument in its favor in the fact that in two places the mosaic extends over worn parts of thresholds. This seems to indicate a considerable time-lag between the period of construction of the church and the laying of the mosaics (*Revue Biblique*, 46, 1937, p. 102 ff.). Harvey, on the other hand, contended that the mosaic areas in question are patches and not part of the original mosaic work which he considered to be Constantinian (*Structural Survey*, p. 18; see also *Archaeologia*, 87, 1937, p. 16). Granted that the mosaic covering the thresholds may be secondary – which seems to me far from certain –, it follows by no means that the original work must be as early as Harvey claimed.

¹⁷ F. J. Dölger, *Antike und Christentum*, V (Münster i.W., 1936), p. 81 ff.

¹⁸ *Id.*, *IXΘYC* (Münster i.W., 1910–1943), *passim*. See also J. Quasten, in: *Miscellanea G. Mercati*, I (= *Studi e Testi*, 121, 1946), p. 373 ff., especially p. 382 ff.

¹⁹ Dölger, *IXΘYC*, I, p. 248 ff.; IV, pl. 205 f.

²⁰ Father Bagatti perhaps hints at this explanation when he says that the position of the inscription does not seem fortuitous (*op. cit.*, p. 43).

²¹ P. Wolters, »Faden und Knoten als Amulett«, *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 8 (Beiheft gewidmet Hermann Usener), 1905, p. 1 ff.; J. Heckenbach, *De nuditate sacra sacrisque vinculis* (Giessen, 1911), p. 78 ff.; K.-H. Clasen, »Die Überwindung des Bösen«, *Neue Beiträge Deutscher Forschung, Wilhelm Worringer zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. E. Fidler (Königsberg, 1943) p. 13 ff.; C. L. Day, *Quipus and Witches' Knots* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1967).

touches upon a wide field. Any broad generalization would be dangerous in view of the common – and surely often quite mechanical – use of the knot motif in the decorative arts of late antiquity and on floor mosaics in particular. I shall put the matter on the narrowest basis possible and merely quote two instances from other floor mosaics in which, because of the physical location and architectural context, Solomon's knot undeniably has a special function as an apotropaion guarding an entrance. One is the principal room of a small second-century house in Ostia paved with a diagonal meander pattern in black and white. On its threshold, against a black background, is a white square containing in its center a single Solomon's knot (fig. 6)²². The other is in the mosaics on the upper level of the House of the Phoenix at Antioch, attributed by Levi to the early sixth century. Adjoining on the northeast side the huge floor which has given the house its name is a room paved in mosaic with an all-over pattern of interlacing circles. The field is surrounded by a border of octagons containing squares. At one point, however, at or near the center of the side adjacent to the Phoenix floor, the monotony of this simple border pattern is broken. Here a sequence of three octagons contains respectively a Solomon's knot, a whirl, and another (square) Solomon's knot (fig. 7). There can be no doubt that this stretch of the border marks the threshold of the door which gave access to this room from the room – or, more probably, courtyard – with the Phoenix floor²³. The whirl, it should be added in passing, is another apotropaion familiar from lintels²⁴.

It is not my intention with the foregoing remarks to open a floodgate of symbolic interpretations of innocent ornaments in late antique art. The perils are only too obvious. But one can err equally through an excess of skepticism. Certainly the two examples I have quoted are not the only ones, aside from Bethlehem, in which Solomon's knot was invested with a special meaning. I have chosen what I believe to be indisputable cases closely comparable to Bethlehem so far as the physical location of the motif is concerned, and spanning the period within which the Bethlehem mosaic was made. Other instances in which Solomon's knot was featured with special emphasis and a probably similar intent could easily be quoted. On the other hand, there are countless cases in which the motif clearly was used routinely and with little or no special purpose. Indeed, in the Bethlehem floors themselves it recurs repeatedly and in random positions in the nave and in the south aisle²⁵. In surveying the material one soon becomes aware that a hard and fast determination is often impossible. Just as there were shades and degrees in the amount of emphasis which the motif received within a design, so there must have been shades and degrees in the amount of meaning that was attached to it in the designer's mind. Possibilities run the gamut from precise symbolism via the vaguely

²² *Notizie degli Scavi*, 1908, p. 23, fig. 1; G. Becatti, *Mosaici e pavimenti marmorei* (= *Scavi di Ostia*, IV, Rome, 1961), p. 63f., no. 81, pl. 28.

²³ Levi, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), p. 351; pls. 83b, 135c. For the likelihood that the Phoenix floor was open to the sky see also R. Stillwell, in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 15, 1961, p. 54. The placing of the Phoenix motif itself shows that the main axis of the building was from southwest to northeast, so that the principal entrance to the room under discussion probably was on the side on which the special ornaments are. There seems to have been another threshold on the opposite

side, but it is not clear whether at that point, too, the border of octagons was enriched by special motifs.

²⁴ W. K. Prentice, *Greek and Latin Inscriptions* (= Publications of an American Archaeological Expedition to Syria in 1899–1900, III, New York, 1908), p. 18; cf., e. g., *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904–1905 and 1909*, Div. III, Section B, Part 4, no. 1081, p. 123 (456 A.D.), and no. 1089, p. 127f.

²⁵ *QDAP* 5, 1936, pls. 44, 46; *Archaeologia*, 87, 1937, pl. 7.

meaningful to the purely ornamental. The notion of a »semantic range« within which meaning is determined by context is familiar from modern linguistics²⁶. The principle has its application also in the visual arts. What precisely a motif signifies within a composition can depend on the context, in much the same way as does the meaning of a word in a sentence.

With this principle in mind we may touch briefly on another aspect of Solomon's knot as it appears at Bethlehem in the panel opposite the Ichthys inscription. The knot incorporates the shape of an X and might thus be considered to hold its own vis-a-vis the acrostic not only as another apotropaion but also as another reference to the name of Christ. The use of the X – sign as a »seal« of Christ – and as a reference to His cross – goes back to a very early period²⁷. E. Dinkler in his recent searching studies of this subject, which have thrown much light also on the antecedent Jewish symbolism of the sign, has spoken of Solomon's knot in this connection and has pointed out that the history of this motif has yet to be written²⁸. A short essay such as the present is not the place to fill the lacuna. It must suffice to point out that the situation at Bethlehem lends support to Dinkler's contention that Solomon's knot can serve as a substitute for X. Indeed, the X-shape seems to recur there in two guises in the Ichthys panel itself. The top right-hand square of that panel again shows Solomon's knot, as presumably did the corresponding square in the lower left where no mosaic is preserved. The other two corner squares are adorned with what at first sight appears to be a checker-board pattern which, however, may also incorporate a chiasitic motif²⁹.

Whether or not the interpretation of these ornaments as disguised X-forms is justified we may hold fast to our principal contention, namely, that at Bethlehem Solomon's knot – specifically in its use as a pendant to the Ichthys inscription – served an apotropaic function. In terms of their meaning the two panels are equivalents. Together they guard the approach to the most sacred part of the building. In the purely formal sense, however, there remains a strange imbalance, and it is tempting to relate this asymmetry to the architecture of the area. Here again I touch upon a controversial subject and I do so with some hesitation, especially since I have had no opportunity to investigate the architectural remains myself. But the available descriptions, drawings, and photographs leave no doubt as to the essential data. I have already mentioned the fact that the two mosaic squares are situated on either side of a very slightly raised platform and that this platform is thought to be the lowest of three steps that led from the nave to the sanctuary. Indeed, on the right (or south) side a second riser was found still *in situ*³⁰. On the left hand side, however, the platform has been cut through to accommodate a flight of steps leading down to the Grotto itself (fig. 2)³¹. W. Harvey and E. T.

²⁶ S. Ullmann, *The Principles of Semantics* (Glasgow and Oxford, 1957), p. 62f.

²⁷ E. Dinkler, »Kreuzzeichen und Kreuz«, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, 5, 1962, p. 93ff. (with further references). The article is reprinted, with additions, in the author's recent book *Signum Crucis: Aufsätze zum Neuen Testament und zur christlichen Archäologie* (Tübingen, 1967).

²⁸ *Signum Crucis*, p. 53.

²⁹ I am judging from black and white illustrations, which may be misleading. No description of the colors employed for this pattern is available to me.

³⁰ Harvey, *Structural Survey*, fig. 65; *QDAP*, 5, 1936, pl. 41, fig. 2.

³¹ Harvey, *Structural Survey*, p. 18 and figs. 61–64, 66; *idem*, in: *Archaeologia*, 87, 1937, p. 12 and pl. 10, 2; Richmond, in: *QDAP*, 5, 1936, p. 77f. and pl. 42 (= our fig. 2). At a later time these steps were narrowed by the insertion of a secondary wall clearly visible in the illustrations. They then started at a higher level, witness the additional riser to the left of that wall and well above the level of the Ichthys panel. Harvey's contention that from the outset these steps started on

Richmond, the discoverers of the remains of the Constantinian basilica, considered these steps secondary³². In the original layout of the church they thought access to the Grotto must have been gained by other means, but the suggestions they made in this respect were purely conjectural³³. Father Bagatti, on the other hand, is of the opinion that the left or northern half of the platform enclosed from the outset a flight of descending steps and that only the southern – badly worn – end of the platform formed the base of a short flight of ascending steps leading up to the octagon. For the descent he reconstructs five steps leading transversely from left to right. At the foot of the fifth step he assumes a 90 degree turn to the east, with further steps leading down to a still existent – though walled up – entrance to the Grotto³⁴. I see no reason to doubt Father Bagatti's contention that this was indeed the original solution devised by Constantine's architect to provide access from the nave to the Grotto as well as to the sanctuary. In any case, I believe that this must have been the arrangement in the early fifth century when the mosaics were laid and that it explains both the presence of the two square panels and their asymmetry. Both were placed close to the thresholds of what were then key openings in the circulation system of the building, but the one on the left was more important than the one on the right. It marked the point of access to the very spot where Christ was born. Here alone His name was articulated.

The fifth century floor decoration of the Church of the Nativity is imperfectly preserved and may have included other apotropaic devices. The extant part of the decoration comprises one further marginal element which possibly is meaningful, and which must be mentioned at least in passing. In the room flanking the octagon to the north (on the axis of the outer north aisle) a fragment of a white mosaic floor was found. The extant portion shows a simple black border marking the northwest corner of this room and, just inside the border, a sequence of three small cruciform motifs also in black (fig. 8)³⁵. One is naturally reminded of the little crosses on the floor of the Martyrion of St. Babylas. But the situation is different here. The crosses are rendered ornamentally³⁶, and in the section of the wall which they adjoin there seems to be no trace of a threshold. In the circumstances it would be hazardous to interpret them as an apotropaion on the same order as the crosses at Antioch or the two panels at the east end of the nave at Bethlehem itself.

al level above that of the mosaic floor is not borne out by his illustrations.

³² See preceding footnote.

³³ Harvey and Richmond originally proposed a stairway in the longitudinal axis of the nave, descending from west to east and cutting through what they considered the central part of the steps leading up to the octagon (*QDAP*, 5, 1936, p. 81). Essentially, this was also the idea of Père Vincent, who incorporated it in his plan of the basilica suppressing in the process the existing transversal platform entirely (*Revue Biblique*, 45, 1936, p. 558 and pl. 2; *Atti del IV Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana*, II, p. 69, fig. 2; p. 73f.). Richmond subsequently proposed an access to the Grotto through two flights of stairs within the octagon (*QDAP*, 6, 1938, p. 66 and fig. 1).

³⁴ Bagatti, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 14), p. 47 and figs. 16f.;

cf. also fig. 37, 1.

³⁵ Harvey, *Structural Survey*, p. 20 and figs. 89, 89A. Cf. *Revue Biblique*, 45, 1936, pl. 7,2; *QDAP*, 5, 1936, pl. 39. Harvey remarks that the technique here is coarser than in the nave. This is not unusual for pavements in secondary areas and need not signify a difference in date.

³⁶ Cf., e. g., the surround of a mosaic in a villa at Balácsa in Hungary attributed by A. Kiss to the third century (*La Mosaïque Gréco-Romaine – supra* n. 2 –, p. 300 and fig. 15); also the surrounds of some of the panels of the pavement of the synagogue at Sardis (D. G. Mitten, *The Ancient Synagogue of Sardis* [New York, 1965], fig. 4; E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, XII [New York, 1965], p. 195, fig. 5; *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 187, October 1967, p. 31ff., figs. 53f.).

I shall conclude these brief observations with a reference to the well-known Edict of 427 A. D. which forbade the representation of the »sign of Christ« on the floor³⁷. Is it not possible that what prompted the imperial government to act in this matter was an increasing popularity of such signs not just on floors in general but on thresholds in particular? This is where the danger of desecration was greatest; and the examples from Antioch and Bethlehem show that signs of Christ had come into use in this position at precisely the time when the law was promulgated. In putting forward this suggestion I do not, however, mean to imply a safe *terminus ante quem* for the Bethlehem mosaics. Rather than being counted among the instances which provoked the Edict they could also be interpreted as a response to it. If *signum Christi* is construed narrowly to mean only a plain cross the special devices which were incorporated in the floor of the Church of the Nativity could be said to have been chosen in an attempt to comply with the letter, if not the spirit, of the law. In any case, the Edict was not entirely effective. There are plain crosses on floor mosaics which are undoubtedly later than 427 A. D.³⁸, and the prohibition had to be reaffirmed not only in the Code of Justinian but even as late as 692 A. D. when it was included among the canons of the Council in Trullo³⁹. But whatever the precise chronological relationship of the Bethlehem mosaics to the Edict of 427 may be, it would certainly seem that the protection of the threshold had become a particular concern at that time⁴⁰.

This, however, was only part of a broader phenomenon which was to have a considerable future. Whether in our two sanctuaries in Antioch and Bethlehem similar protective devices were incorporated also in the superstructure we cannot say⁴¹. But

³⁷ »... signum salvatoris Christi nemini licere vel in solo vel in silice vel in marmoribus humi positus insculpere vel pingere, sed quodcumque reperiatur tolli« (Cod. Just. I, 8, 1; ed. P. Krueger [Berlin, 1954], p. 61).

³⁸ E. g., nos. 133 and 326 in Avi-Yonah's inventory cited *supra* n. 5; also the pavement in the baptistery at Butrinto (*supra*, n. 12) which is certainly of the sixth century.

³⁹ J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, XI (Florence, 1765), col. 975, no. 73.

⁴⁰ H. Brandenburg, in an important recent article (»Bellerophon christianus?«, *Römische Quartalschrift*, 63, 1968, p. 49 ff.), has discussed the Edict of 427 in a different context and has suggested that it was prompted primarily by an increasing use of »signs of Christ« on floors in private houses (*ibid.*, p. 85). His point of departure is the mosaic pavement of Hinton St. Mary which has as its central motif what appears to be a bust of Christ with a Chi-Rho-monogram behind its head. He recognizes a magic and apotropaic element in the depiction of the monogram of Christ when it occurs on floors in the private sector but is unaware of the indubitable presence of the same element on the floors of churches (*ibid.*, p. 79 f.). A brief reference should here be added to an extremely interesting floor decoration first discovered more than thirty years ago by the University of Pennsylvania at Kourion in Cyprus. These mosaics, which still await publication, do belong to a secular building and their date must

be quite close to that of the Edict (see the preliminary notices by J. F. Daniel in *University Museum Bulletin*, 7, no. 2, March 1938, p. 4 ff., and by De Coursey Fales, Jr., *ibid.*, 14, no. 4, June 1950, p. 27 ff. The date proposed by Daniel is certainly too early; I owe to the kindness of Mr. Fales the information that a coin of Theodosius II was found beneath the mosaic illustrated in *Bulletin*, June 1950, pl. 8). The feature which is of special interest in the present context is a poetic inscription on one of the thresholds referring to »signs of Christ« which the house »has girded to itself«. It is tempting to relate to this inscription the four large cruciform motifs on which the ornamental design of the adjoining field is based and perhaps even the two fishes which – along with three birds – form part of the same design (*Bulletin*, March 1938, pls. 1, 3), though, of course, the inscription could also refer to »signs« that were incorporated in the superstructure. In any case, by implication the verses seem to attribute to the »signs of Christ« in this building apotropaic powers.

⁴¹ Nothing is preserved of the superstructure of the Martyrion of St. Babylas. As for the Church of the Nativity, we might refer in this context to the little crosses which form part of the ornament of the abaci of the nave capitals (cf. A. Grabar, in *Cahiers archéologiques*, 11, 1960, p. 45 ff. and fig. 2). These capitals, however, are in all probability not those of the Constantinian church, even though they may be more or less faithful copies thereof; see Harvey, in: *Archaeo-*

we are able to glimpse in these floor mosaics the beginnings of an »uniconic« system of church decoration subsequently developed mainly on walls and vaults and providing vulnerable parts of the building with manifold »signs of Christ«⁴².

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logia, 87, 1937, p. 13f.; R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, (Baltimore, 1965), p. 189.

⁴² Grabar, *Martyrium*, II, p. 280 ff.

Note: I am greatly indebted to Miss M. Katherine Donaldson for her assistance in the preparation of this paper; also to Professor Richard Stillwell and Miss Kaz Higuchi of the Department of Art and Archaeology of Princeton University for the photographs reproduced in figs. 1 and. 7.